

Suicide Prevention

and Adults in a Correctional Setting

Incarcerated adults are at higher risk for suicide than the general population. Suicide accounted for 5–8% of annual deaths in prisons and 24–35% of annual deaths in local jails from 2001–2019.¹ In contrast, suicide accounts for about 1–2% of annual deaths in the community. General risk factors for suicide such as mental health diagnoses, substance use disorders and trauma are common and often chronic among incarcerated persons. For instance, 40% of incarcerated persons have a history of mental illness,² an estimated 65% have an active substance use disorder³ – and 6% of incarcerated males and 21% of incarcerated females meet the criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).⁴

When working with adults in a correctional environment, it is important to be aware of risk factors, warning signs and what you can do to help prevent suicide.



Risk Factors for Adults in a Correctional Setting

A risk factor is a characteristic or condition that increases the chance a person may think about, attempt or die by suicide. Research⁵ identified the following risk factors specific to adults in a correctional setting:

- Suicidal ideation during incarceration period.
- History of suicide attempt(s) or non-suicidal self-injury.
- Current psychiatric diagnoses.
- Single-cell occupancy or solitary confinement.
- No social visits.
- Pre-trial status.
- Serving a life sentence.
- Conviction of a violent offense, particularly homicide.
- Impulsivity and recklessness.⁶

Warning Signs for Suicide in Adults in a Correctional Setting

Warning signs are indicators that a person may be in acute danger of making a suicide attempt or dying by suicide. The following are warning signs associated with adults in correctional environments:

- Talking about suicide or wishing to die (usually to their peers or loved ones).
- Looking for a way to kill oneself.
- Expressing hopelessness or feeling trapped.
- Mood or behavior changes including extreme sadness, loss of interest or increased agitation.
- Expressions or evidence of strong guilt or shame associated with offense.
- Packing belongings or giving away possessions.

High-Risk Periods for Suicide

Research identified the following time periods when suicides in correctional facilities are more likely to occur:

- Upon admission and within the first month.
- Nighttime and times of decreased staff supervision.
- Pending release from custody, especially if the person has been incarcerated for a long time or lacks a viable discharge plan.
- Soon after release from custody.
- After bad news (either legally or personally).
- During holidays, anniversaries or other days special to the person.



Preventing Suicide in the Correctional Environment

Suicide prevention in correctional environments begins at intake and does not end until the person is successfully integrated back into the community. The following are ways to increase suicide prevention efforts:

- Adopt the belief that suicide is preventable, and suicide prevention is the responsibility of everyone within the correctional environment.
- If you notice a person not acting like themselves or exhibiting warning signs for suicide, ask them clearly and directly: “Are you thinking of killing yourself?”
- When talking to incarcerated people who have thoughts of suicide, listen and interact with them in a caring and nonjudgmental way.
- Use safe and person-centered language when discussing suicide and mental illness (e.g., died by suicide vs. committed suicide, person with schizophrenia vs. schizophrenic).
- Screen regularly for suicide risk using an evidence-based screener, particularly if you notice warning signs or during high-risk periods.
- When a person is identified as being at risk for suicide from the screening, get a qualified mental health professional to conduct a comprehensive suicide risk assessment. The assessment should include a synthesis of suicide risk factors and protective factors to help inform treatment and placement decisions.
- Facilities should have policies in place for suicide prevention, intervention and postvention, and ensure all staff are aware of the policies.
- Train staff (and incarcerated persons) in suicide prevention.
- Ensure people are screened for suicide risk prior to being released from custody.
- Conduct discharge planning and connect people to behavioral health care and supports prior to release.
- Implement the Zero Suicide Framework in your facility.
- Watch for burnout, compassion fatigue, and suicidal thoughts in yourself and co-workers.
- Prioritize self-care. It is a way to prevent compassion fatigue and burnout, keeping you healthy.

Incarcerated adults are at higher risk for suicide than the general population.



A Note About Suicide Watch

Suicide watch is sometimes a necessary component for individual and institutional safety. However, the highly restrictive nature of suicide watch can sometimes compound a person's feelings of shame, isolation and hopelessness, making thoughts of suicide worse. Additionally, the fear of being placed on suicide watch can discourage people from disclosing thoughts of suicide. Incarcerated people with thoughts of suicide should not be placed in isolation unless it is absolutely necessary.

Decisions about placing people on suicide watch should only be made after a thorough risk assessment and strong considerations of other less restrictive settings. Keeping someone in the least restrictive setting possible, while limiting access to lethal means, is ideal. If it is necessary to place a person on suicide watch, it is important to explain the process, reasons behind it, and to treat the person with dignity and respect to make the process less traumatic.

References:

- Download the **Suicide Prevention Resource Guide: National Response Plan for Suicide Prevention in Corrections**: project2025.afsp.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/NCCHC-AFSP_Suicide_Prevention_Resource_Guide.pdf

- Download the **Suicide Prevention Resources for Adult Corrections**:
sprc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/AdultCorrectionsResourceSheet-1.pdf
- Download the **The Role of Corrections Officers in Preventing Suicide**:
sprc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/CorrectionOfficers.pdf
- Visit the **Zero Suicide Framework** website:
zerosuicide.edc.org/
- Read the article about **12 Strategies for Combating Burnout in Corrections**:
lexipol.com/resources/blog/12-strategies-for-combating-burnout-in-corrections/
- Read the article about **Correctional Officers and Compassion Fatigue**:
psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-crime-and-justice-doctor/202003/correctional-officers-and-compassion-fatigue
- Visit **Columbia-Suicide Severity Rating Scale for Corrections**:
cssrs.columbia.edu/the-scale-in-action/corrections/
- Download the **Language Matters** flyer:
texashhs.org/language-matters

1 Bureau of Justice Statistics: Suicide in Local Jails and State and Federal Prisons, 2000–2019, bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/suicide-local-jails-and-state-and-federal-prisons-2000-2019-statistical-tables.

2 Mental Illness and the Criminal Justice System, [NAMI_CriminalJusticeSystem-v5](#)

3 Criminal Justice Drug Facts, nida.nih.gov/publications/drugfacts/criminal-justice.

4 Suicide Prevention Resource Guide: National Response Plan for Suicide Prevention in Corrections, project2025.afsp.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/NCCHC-AFSP_Suicide_Prevention_Resource_Guide.pdf.

5 Zhong, S., Senior, M., Yu, R., Perry, A., Hawton, K., Shaw, J., & Fazel, S. (2021). Risk factors for suicide in prisons: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *The Lancet Public Health*, 6(3), [doi.org/10.1016/s2468-2667\(20\)30233-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/s2468-2667(20)30233-4).

6 The Role of Corrections Officers in Preventing Suicide, sprc.org/resources-programs/role-adult-correctional-officers-preventing-suicide-sprc-customized-information.

